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Pushing myself harder, listening differently: the student experience of reflective practice

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eca centre for continuing studies

**CAUCE Conference
Vancouver May 2009**

**‘pushing myself harder,
listening differently’: the
student experience of
reflective practice**

Geraldine Prince

Joan Smith

eca edinburgh college of art

eca centre for continuing studies

key idea: reflective practice as a structured and transformative experience, interrogated via the student voice



eca centre for continuing studies
edinburgh and vancouver:
twin cities, shared cultures



CCS: The CCS team visit Kyoto, Edinburgh's twin city:
internationalising life-long learning and making learning
opportunities real



Estonian staff development workshop



CCS in the Gulf: CPD for teachers workshop Dubai 08



**“pushing myself harder, listening differently”:
meeting the challenges of part-time learning for and
by adults**



Dearing's 'Recommendation 21'

'We recommend that institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop, for each programme they offer, a "programme specification" which identifies potential stopping-off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:

- the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;
- key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;
- cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;
- subject-specific skills, such as laboratory skills'.

Described by some academics as a 'ticking time bomb', this emphasis on learning outcomes and student-centred learning transformed HE in the UK

Quality Assurance Agency: Subject Benchmark Statements

- **2 Defining principles**
- 2.1 'Art and design' is the term widely used to embrace a complex, diverse and evolving constituency of disciplines which share important conceptual characteristics but which are differentiated in significant respects....the different disciplines share numerous defining qualities.

The Scottish Parliament at Holyrood



SCQF Scottish credit Qualifications Framework

- **SCQF Level 7 (SHE level 1) (Cert HE, HNC, Advanced Higher are examples of qualifications on this level)**
- **NB** These descriptors set out the characteristic generic outcomes of each level. They are intended to provide a general, shared understanding of each level and to allow broad comparisons to be made between qualifications and learning at different levels. They are not intended to give precise or comprehensive statements, and there is no expectation that every qualification or programme should have all of the characteristics. The descriptors have been developed through a series of consultations and are offered as a first working guide which will be revised in the light of feedback on their use.

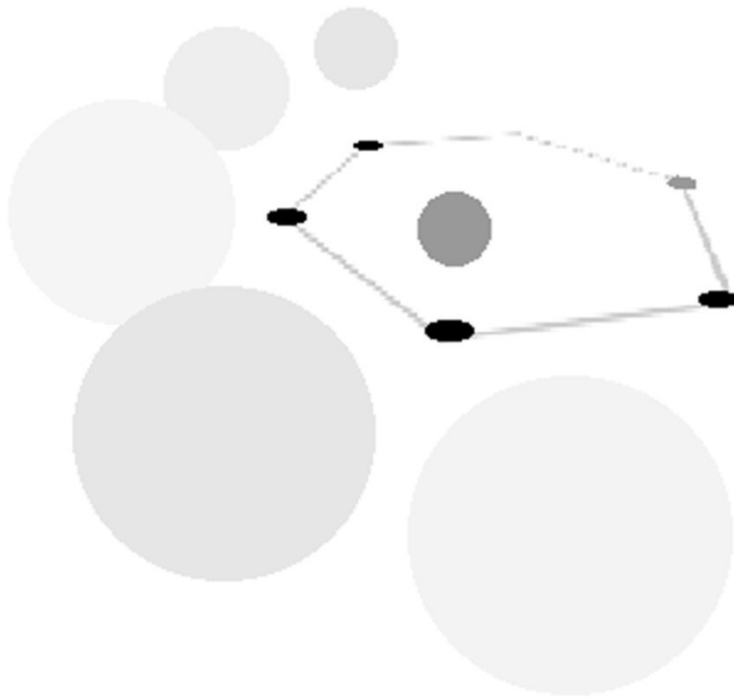
SCQF framework generic outcomes for each level

<http://www.scqf.org.uk/AbouttheFramework/LevelDescriptors.aspx?>

Click on 'Handbook' & scroll to p42 for Level 7 (1st year HE equivalent)

Knowledge and understanding	Practice: Applied knowledge and understanding	Generic cognitive skills	Communication, ICT and numeracy skills	Autonomy, accountability and working with others
Characteristic outcomes of learning at each level include the ability to:				
<p>Demonstrate and/or work with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a broad knowledge of the subject/discipline in general knowledge that is embedded in the main theories, concepts and principles an awareness of 	<p>Use some of the basic and routine professional skills, techniques, practices and/or materials associated with a subject/discipline.</p> <p>Practise these in both routine and non-routine contexts.</p>	<p>Present and evaluate arguments, information and ideas which are routine to the subject/discipline.</p> <p>Use a range of approaches to addressing defined and/or routine problems and issues within familiar contexts.</p>	<p>Use a wide range of routine skills and some advanced skills associated with the subject/discipline — for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> convey complex ideas in well-structured and coherent form use a range of forms of communication 	<p>Exercise some initiative and independence in carrying out defined activities at a professional level.</p> <p>Take supervision in less familiar areas of work.</p> <p>Take some managerial responsibility for the work of others within a defined and supervised structure.</p>

‘Pushing myself harder, listening differently’: the transformative, student-centred learning experience exists within the structured framework of the Combined Studies Degree (see figure below)



- › The ‘galaxy and constellations’ logo offers students a visual ‘map’ of the degree conveying the idea of a fluid and flexible structure in which options and pathways rotate around a central core.
- › The core structure exerts a ‘gravitational pull’ which ensures coherence and discipline but not rigidity and uniformity.
- › Students know where they are and know where they are going but have freedom to choose an individualised route.

Art students, art history, art theory and written language

- Discourses of types of 'knowledge' in art colleges: should students be 'taught to write'? Isn't visual practice 'enough'?
- 'arguments' can be "presented in things rather than words" (Buchanan, 1989, in Margolin (ed) *Design Discourse*, Chicago & London, 1989)
- Degree requirements expect students to write, so how to move writing as close as possible to studio practice? Encourage written reflection is the CCS solution
- Christopher Frayling, 'Research in Art and design', in *Royal College of Art Research Papers 1* (London, RCA, 1993)
- Fiona Doloughan, 'The Language of Reflective Practice in Art and Design', Surrey Scholarship Online, <http://epubs.surrey.ac.uk/translation/2>

The *Learning to Learn* Module: questions require answers ranging from 200 to 800 words depending on the question

- What made you choose Combined Studies?
- What do you hope to get out of the programme from a personal point of view? How will it literally change your life?
- How do you anticipate the programme will help you to develop creatively and intellectually? How will it affect how you think about the process of making art?
- Expectations and New Challenges: Please describe and analyse the expectations and new challenges that are being presented by the degree programme.
- Strengths and weaknesses: evaluation of application and changes to the portfolio. Please [...] explain strengths and weaknesses of your application portfolio
- Identify what you have learnt from this exercise [...] what have you learned about thinking critically about your own work? What do you know about your work, and ways of working now, that you didn't know six months ago?

The *Learning to Learn* Module: concluding questions – no word limit, students are free to choose how much to say but in reality select a word length that continues the rhythm of their previous answers

- **Reflect on what you think it means to you to be an undergraduate student taking a degree programme. How is it affecting the way in which you think about your art practice, the choices you make about how to prioritise your time, and your attitude to culture in the broadest sense?**
- **What role do you now think analysing, discussing and writing about your art practice has to play in the development of your work as an undergraduate? Does this open up new ways of thinking about art and design?**

Hearing Voices: the culture of conversation



A student-tutor dialogue

Student

- By doing the degree I will push myself harder than I would if I continued as a Life Long Learner...I am already listening differently to the feedback from tutors, and behaving and responding differently to it.

Tutor

- *The feedback is probably the same – the change is in you*

Learning to be a lifelong learner through degree study and taking ownership of learning

- My previous experience of distance learning took place through the Institute of Bankers exams...the BA Combined Studies sounded more supported...
- [I hope to] be in the company of like-minded people with whom I can discuss ideas; absorb all the information both visual and verbal available to me and that will remain with me throughout the rest of my life— I don't see this diminishing...The new challenges that I have successfully met so far are that the responsibility is on me to draw knowledge from my tutors...and to do this by communicating my needs to them
- *It sounds as though your experience at eca has been good so far and it is encouraging to read such well formulated responses...[but] remember your journal is the vehicle for 'reflective practice' which means thinking about what you are doing – not simply recording it – I am sure you will see the difference*

Reflective thinking, action, knowledge, outcomes

- The decision to apply for the BA is an important step for me in a process of creative discovery and recovery...
 - I realised that in my whole life I had not taken responsibility for my creative self. This awakening included taking the step to do some evening classes...I feel I am finally taking the reins of my own life and focussing my energy on what I need... In a sense I am making a leap of faith...
 - I hope to explore the language of my expression, to find a basic structure/grammar I can use to explore and express the world outside and in.
- *Lots of ambition...you are applying discipline and thinking very clearly ...but [there is evidence] you don't take yourself seriously and you must. ...I can hear you opening up to a new way of thinking about yourself. Take yourself seriously, focus, think...there is a real, lively intelligence at work here*

Reflective practice to uncover a point of departure, and move forward: asking simple questions to uncover thoughtful answers and avoid 'genius'

- I hope that the programme will be a galvanising force to help me restart my life after a long period of ill health and recovery, but in a way that is sustainable and fulfilling. I hope the programme will give me an environment to explore some of the big questions in life about purpose and meaning, not through grandiose ideas, but rather through exploration of ordinary, everyday realities, which I believe give life purpose and direction. It is the seemingly mundane which contains the essence of what it is to be human
- *You are absolutely spot on in your understanding – any serious artist will tell you that making art is to do with effort, making small steps, allowing ideas to grow through hard work. 'Genius', 'inspiration', 'talent', 'passion' are very small parts of the CCs equation. You should do well with this approach...But there is also a tension between a 'doer and maker' and a more 'conscious' or perhaps 'self conscious' being. The phrase 'the person I am becoming' will emerge in a wholly satisfying way when the tensions are resolved through hard work and experiment*

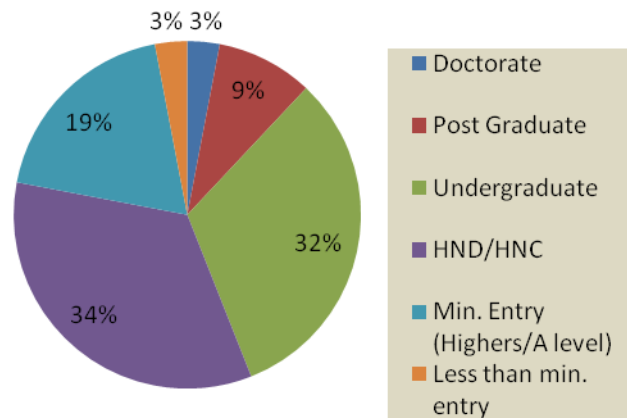
Learning through reflective practice before and after entry to the degree and understanding how 'learning' takes place

- During the application process I produced more research and sketchbook work than I ever had [as a lifelong learner]...doing the practise, investigation and research makes producing finished work so much more natural, fluent and enjoyable...the more you do for yourself, the more help you get back. With more research work completed prior to classes, more benefit can be gained from developing ideas while a tutor is present. Coming to a class at a decision point allows a more in-depth discussion takes place and asks more challenging questions....I have met the challenge of Life drawing better since I have taken more classes
- *Well thought out and very encouraging to read. I'd say you've cracked it in terms of understanding . . .*
- *This [...] positively crackles with intelligent, purposeful questioning and I can 'hear' you thinking, resolving and moving on...*

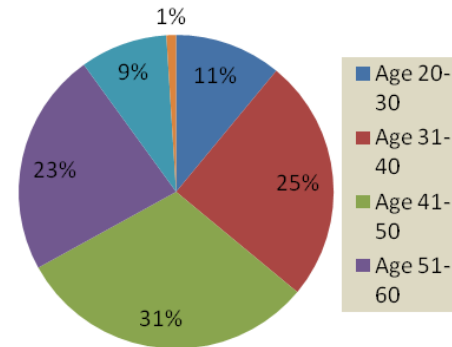
BA Combined Studies

Entry qualifications and age on entry

Highest qualification on entry



Learning to Learn
Age when taken

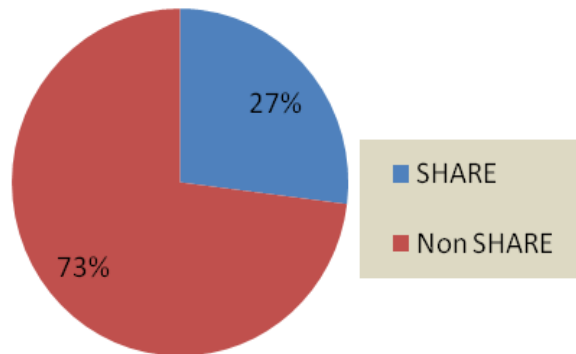


BA Combined Studies

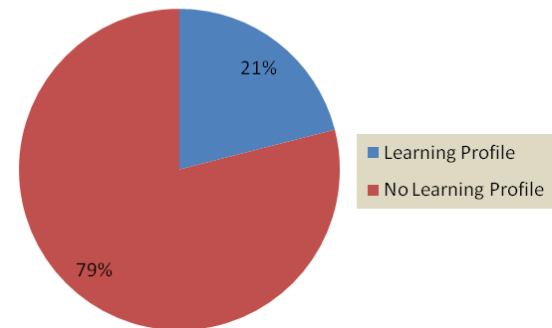
Widening participation with 'Share' scholarships

'Learning Profiles' help students with specific learning needs

SHARE v. non SHARE



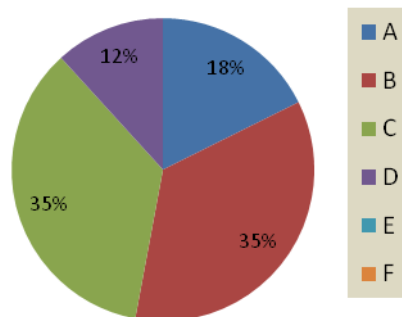
Students with Learning Profiles



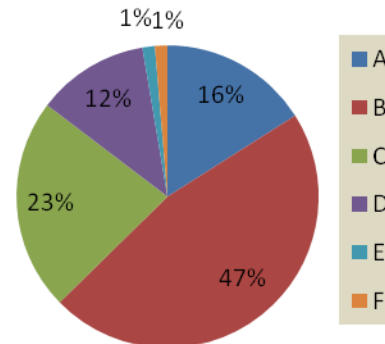
BA Combined Studies

Learning to Learn and Studio grades

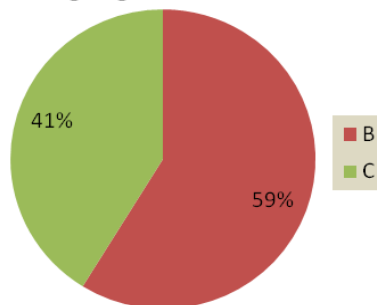
SHARE
Learning to Learn Grades



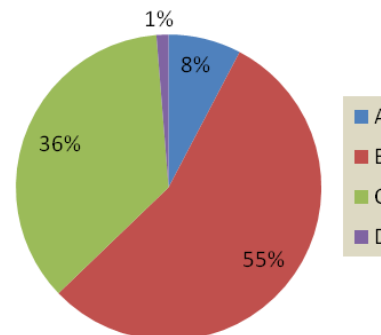
Non-SHARE
Learning to Learn Grades



SHARE
Average Studio Grade



Non SHARE
Average Studio Grades



Studio Conversations: the importance of dialogue in learning and teaching



The discipline of Reflective Practice

Fischli and Weiss 'How to Work Better'



HOW TO WORK BETTER.

1 DO ONE THING

AT A TIME

2 KNOW THE PROBLEM

3 LEARN TO LISTEN

**4 LEARN TO ASK
QUESTIONS**

**5 DISTINGUISH SENSE
FROM NONSENSE**

**6 ACCEPT CHANGE
AS INEVITABLE**

7 ADMIT MISTAKES

8 SAY IT SIMPLE

9 BE CALM

10 SMILE

Analysing the *Learning to Learn* module: an exercise in developing reflective practice at SCQF level 7 (First year)

4 Transformative experiences:

- The quest for learning: Cara
- The widening vision: Flora
- 'Unlearning' and adapting: Fidelity
- Learning to learn better, differently, longer: Hannah

Transformative Experiences 1: Cara

The quest for learning from lifelong learning and credit award to degree. A personal learning pathway.



Transformative Experiences 1: Cara

The quest for learning from lifelong learning and credit award to degree: making explicit the student motivation in terms of learning

- *I have spent the past 12 years in an industry where answers had to be accepted and questions were often left unanswered, with 'Why?' generating much concern. After a while it became clear that my curiosity to learn was to be contained if I wanted to progress in this profession*
- *As I started my studies at eca last year I realised that I could question and explore, challenge and accept if I wanted to. I could be myself and that would be a good thing.*
- *I hope that the program will allow me to be myself... to develop...I would like to push myself as far as I could go.*
- *I find if I am too critical when I am researching it stops me from investigating. There are times and places to be critical and times not to be. I think it's about balance.*

Cara

Transformative experiences 2: Flora

The 'widening' vision and widened horizons



Transformative experiences 2: Flora

The 'epiphanic' accident and the planned intervention

I chanced upon a lifelong learning leaflet and noticed the entry by Edinburgh College of Art. Following a phone call of enquiry I found myself handing in a portfolio of my old artwork, or what was left of it, and was subsequently offered a portfolio preparation course. My daughters also attended the young talents class at this point which was an amazing help.

Flora

Transformative experiences 2: Flora

Fear of the unknown; fear of failure: helping students through the hard times.

I can still recall the terror I felt when I attended the first of these classes...

I had become so frightened of producing 'bad' drawings that I chose to avoid drawing altogether....

I had also lost confidence in my abilities on a personal and academic level.

Flora

Transformative experiences 2: Flora

Gaining confidence through affirmative experience

It has taken a long time, and a lot of courage, for me to return to what I love doing most on a personal level but ultimately I felt that the sense of accomplishment when I was accepted on to the course made all my efforts worth it.

Flora

Transformative experiences 3: Fidelity

‘Unlearning’ and Adapting: learning to learn from a different perspective



Transformative experiences 3: Fidelity

Learning for career enhancement

- *I chose to do Combined Studies as a first step in making a career change from an Architect to a visual arts based career, a path that I have chosen to develop and change myself.*
- *The School of Architecture at eca is where I trained to become an Architect and having enjoyed the potential of the college's working environment for 5 years, I felt that to come back and work in the Art School (on account of my career change) would help complement both my earlier and current work.*
- *The creative process of Architecture and the Arts are both similar and very different, something I hope will benefit my work and possibly even set me apart in terms of the combination of the two disciplines.*

Fidelity

Transformative experiences 3: Fidelity

Learning to unlearn; freeing thinking

- *I try to be as meticulous as possible and I would say that my lines are very clean, and appear seemingly lifeless.*
- *I will not always be striving to create a completed piece of work but rather exploring a concept more thoroughly through a series of works... My thinking will be freer as a result, I will not only be thinking about one discipline but a whole number of them.*
- *My sketchbooks... like my poetry, demonstrate my thought process and how I explore the various issues surrounding my themes.*

Fidelity

Transformative experiences 3: Fidelity

Unlearning and Adapting: reflective practice as a means of freeing ideas and planning for the future

- *...having carried out this exercise, I think the key...is to try and loosen up my thinking, to think less of my previous training and think more about the techniques and practices that relate to the particular classes that I am involved in.*
- *It has inspired me to look more broadly at exhibitions I had previously not looked at, and cultural events such as dance and theatre.*
- *It has also made me think about my previous career and how its conventions can suppress creativity.*
- *The role that this analytical writing will have in developing my work in the future is that it will be a checkpoint at the end of each term to review where I have got and help in spotting any areas of work that need further improvement.*

Transformative experiences 4: HJ

Learning to Learn better, differently, longer



Transformative experiences 4: HJ

Interview of a former Combined Studies student

Reflective practice as a means of understanding who we are

Do you remember how it first felt to be a lifelong learner?

- *I'd been doing art for a long time but I was naïve, I didn't even know it was art. It was just playing. I'd sit on a beach making stuff just to be engrossed and go on a different planet.*
- *I didn't have a lot of confidence when I came here and struggled to even talk. Through my mental health I'd spent a whole year in silence.. When you've been so ill nothing fazes you. When you've been as scared as you have been in your whole life and also as happy as you've been in your whole life...*
- *Over the years I'd tried so hard to get into education, it took me four attempts to get an O level. I'm not academic – I work, but it was like I didn't work because I didn't remember. Up until I had this dyspraxia test, and I had a fractured skull from a bike accident – I've only got 20% short term memory. I didn't discover dyspraxia until I applied for this. It was picked up on my application form*

Transformative experiences 4: HJ

Responding to individuality: the tutor response on a one to one basis and the need for support and trust

How did you find working in a studio environment?

- *I was really, really struggling, trying to understand what Stuart was trying to teach me. And I only found this out later but Stuart had gone away and totally rethought how he taught because he was seeing it as a failure that he couldn't get across to me – I just couldn't grasp it – I did in the end, but I didn't realise how much work he'd had to put in.*
- *It's backup and it's trust. If you trust something you get strength from it. I feel that I've built up a relationship with the college.*

Transformative experiences 4: HJ

Working with people; learning new skills

How did your experience of study help you to develop your own interests?

- *I'm really excited when it comes to learning new skills. The skills are not quite there but there's a rawness that I've always really enjoyed.*
- *I never had an interest in doing landscapes...when I started developing my practice, I always enjoyed life drawing, there's a lot there in a person, more than a tree or a building. It was always a people thing.*

Transformative experiences 4: HJ

Planning for the future; building on the past. The development of a personal vision.

How have your projects developed through your experience of learning?

- *I did a project called 'Helen's Herbs' – I didn't want a bit of wall space for a show, so I found my own space which was the college (disused) greenhouse. I put things back to how they used to be – and I grew herbs for the canteen. And I really enjoyed the inter-human responses this created, the communication, the green, the awareness of food*
- *[the next project is] going to be a banquet. All the furniture is hand made but in order for me to get materials I had to source wood and coppice the whole wood – I had to ask for help, learn to coppice [using] old fashioned tools; [everyone] ended up head to toe covered in mud. That was just something else that happened – and that's what my practice is.*
- *I've learnt I can make things happen. I can't do emails, I can't think or write quick enough. It's much better to have a conversation.*

HJ The allotment banquet

